

Context is/as Critique

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Abstract ■ In this article the treatment of context in two schools of contemporary discourse analysis – Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Conversation Analysis (CA) – is discussed. Starting from the observation that critical trends in discourse analysis identify the intersection of language and social structure as the locus of critique, I first qualify the treatment of context in some CDA work as largely backgrounding and narrative. Contextual information that invites critical scrutiny is often accepted as ‘mere facts’, framing the discourse samples analyzed in CDA. On the other hand, context is reduced to a minimal set of observable and demonstrably consequential features of single conversations in CA, and ‘translocal’ phenomena are hard to incorporate in CA analyses. Both treatments of context have severe defects, and in the second part of the article I offer three sets of ‘forgotten contexts’: contexts that are usually overlooked in critical discourse studies but that offer considerable critical potential because they situate discourse deeply in social structure and social processes. Using data from an ongoing project on narrative analysis of African asylum seekers’ stories in Belgium, I discuss linguistic-communicative resources, ‘text trajectories’ (i.e. the shifting of text across contexts) and finally ‘data histories’ (i.e. the socio-historical situatedness of ‘data’).

Keywords ■ asylum seekers ■ contextualization ■ discourse analysis ■ interpretation ■ methodology ■ narrative

Critical punch is a desirable thing for discourse analysts such as myself and the other authors in this volume, who feel that new ways of analyzing the importance of symbolic economies in our world(s) are required in order to come to terms with what we experience as shifting and ever more complex patterns of power and inequality.¹ One of the major sources and objects of power and inequality is symbolic and revolves around the use and abuse of language and discourse. Work on these linguistic-discursive forms of power and inequality has a respectable pedigree (in fact, one could say that it prompted the emergence of at least some branches of modern sociolinguistics – take Labov’s ‘Logic of Nonstandard English’ [1970] as a case in point). Taking stock of recent scholarly developments as well as of perceived and experienced changes in the world should prompt us perpetually to renew the exercise. An ever-present concern in this exercise is the difference we ourselves can (should?) make: that of specifying detail in discourse, of demonstrating the precise and minute ways in which this symbolic commodity works and generates or articulates power and inequality.

Critical trends in discourse analysis emphasize the connection between discourse – talk, text, speech – and social structure. They locate the critical dimension of analysis in the interplay between discourse and society, and suggest ways in which features of social structure need to be treated in discourse analysis in the form of context. My aim in this article is to discuss the way in which conceptions of context are being used in current critical trends of discourse analysis (thus taking stock of recent scholarly developments). I will argue that some of these conceptions are partial and biased, they display a number of fundamental weaknesses, and they need to be complemented with other contexts if one wants to achieve the critical targets set by analysts.

In the first part of the article, I will discuss treatments of context in two schools of discourse analysis. On the one hand, I will discuss Critical Discourse Analysis – a recent and popular, mainly European branch of discourse analysis (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000); on the other hand, I will discuss critical claims in Conversation Analysis – an equally popular school of discourse analysis focused on the examination of procedures and methods of interactional behavior. It so happens that both schools are currently locked in debates over ‘critique’ in their respective approaches (see Schegloff, 1997; Wetherell, 1998; Billig and Schegloff, 1999).² In the second part of the article I will offer three forms of often ‘forgotten’ contexts of discourse and illustrate their potential usefulness as critical tools by means of an analysis of some examples of narratives by African asylum seekers in Belgium. In this part of the article, I will argue for a closer integration of sociolinguistics, ethnography and discourse analysis, claiming that the connection between discourse and social structure should also be described in terms of linguistic-communicative resources and their social values, and of ethnographically grounded histories – histories both of discourse as well as of data and analytical practice.

Two critical conceptions of context

The backgrounding of context: critical discourse analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has emerged over the last decade as an appealing and successful school in discourse analysis. The aims of CDA have been formulated by Ruth Wodak as: ‘analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language’ (Wodak, 1995: 204). CDA states that discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned. Furthermore, discourse is seen as an opaque power object which CDA aims to make more transparent. CDA also advocates interventionism in the social practices it investigates; explicitness in political interests and in the political use of social scientific research are welcomed. CDA thus openly professes strong commitments to change, anti-power biases and practice-orientedness. In

Wodak's work as well as in that of other major CDA practitioners (e.g. Fairclough, 1992), an attempt towards blending linguistic analysis and social-theoretical insight goes hand in hand with a desire to produce 'relevant' research, as well as with political commitment. I sympathize strongly with the aims set by CDA and find it hard to disagree with their fundamental principles and approaches. The differences I have with CDA thus have to be set against the background of a shared preoccupation with power and inequality and with the fundamental blending of discourse and society.

One of the most important methodological problems in discourse analysis in general is the *framing* of discourse in particular *selections of contexts*, the relevance of which is established by the researcher but is not made into an object of investigation. Part of this problem appears to be unavoidable: one always uses all sorts of presuppositions and assumptions, real-world and common-sense knowledge in analysis (see Blommaert, 1997a; Verschueren, this volume). But this problem is especially pressing in the case of CDA, where the social situatedness of discourse data is crucial and where context is often taken to include broad systemic and institutional observations. Not just discourse is analyzed, but *political* discourse, *bureaucratic* discourse, *doctor-patient* discourse. In CDA, discourse is accompanied by a narrative on power and institutions, large portions of which are just copied from rank-and-file sources or inspired by received wisdom.³ Charles Briggs's comments with regard to the preference for 'ordinary' discourse in pragmatics can easily be turned upside down:

... the question of what is 'ordinary' or 'everyday' involves more than simply which data we select but crucially depends on how we frame and analyze them. By severing indexical links to broader social, political and historical parameters we can give even the most historically compelling discourses the look and feel of the mundane. (Briggs, 1997b: 454)

I would add: and vice versa; even the most mundane talk can be transformed into an instance of vulgar power abuse if framed properly. It all comes down to establishing the indexical links referred to by Briggs, identifying them and specifying their precise structure and function. In this respect, a lot of a priori contextualization goes on in work qualified as CDA which I find objectionable. Thus, in much CDA work, a priori statements on power relations are used as perspectives on discourse (e.g. 'power is bad', 'politicians are manipulators', 'media are ideology-reproducing machines'), and social-theoretical concepts and categories are being used in off-hand and seemingly self-evident ways (e.g. 'power', 'institutions', also 'the leading groups in society', 'business' and so on). This leads to highly simplified models of social structures and patterns of action – politicians *always* and *intentionally* manipulate their constituencies, doctors are *by definition* and always the powerful party in doctor-patient relations, etc. – which are then projected on to discourse samples. Power relations are often predefined and then confirmed by features of discourse (sometimes in very questionable ways – see Verschueren, this volume).

Of particular interest here is the use of what could be called *prima facie ethnographies*: dense descriptions of contexts and institutions used as framing devices in analyses. Let us turn to a concrete example: Wodak's (1997) classic paper on 'critical discourse analysis and the study of doctor-patient interaction'. At the beginning of her article she brings it to our attention that:

In modern societies [socially important] domains are embodied in institutions which are structured in terms of social power relationships and characterized by specific divisions of labour . . . Within institutions, elites (typically consisting of white males) occupy the dominant positions and therefore possess power. They determine what Bourdieu . . . calls the 'symbolic market' . . . i.e. the value and prestige of symbolic capital (or certain communicative behaviour). This can be seen most readily in the technical registers used by all professional groups . . . but it also manifests itself less obviously in the form of preferred styles and certain communicative strategies. (Wodak, 1997: 174)

And some pages later, she introduces her research at the hospital with the following contextualizing account:

For an understanding of the context, it is important to realize that the outpatients' ward has very low status and prestige in relation to the rest of the hospital. It is a type of outpost and . . . serves as a training ground for young doctors, which results in inexperienced insiders working where experienced ones are arguably most necessary. Hierarchy, knowledge, experience and gender are interlinked in a strange and unique way in the outpatients' ward . . . (Wodak, 1997: 179)

We are not informed about where such crucial ethnographic information comes from. This is the 'context' for the rest of the analysis, and this context is offered as an unquestionable, untheorized set of 'facts'. The source of such contextual accounts is often obliquely referred to as on-site observation and interviewing (again, untheorized and without discussing any explicit procedures). Their function, however, is crucial: they are central contextualizing features that allow for claims about an 'insiders' perspective' (Wodak, 1997: 178) on the communication patterns studied in CDA. The ethnographic basis of these claims is placed outside the scope of CDA, and one will rarely encounter discussions of fieldwork procedures and approaches in CDA writings. Analysis starts as soon as the data 'are there'.

In the sort of CDA examined here, it is through such a priori contextualizations that talk is socially situated and that distinctions are established between instances of communication that are potential topics for critical discourse analysis and others that are not. The distinction usually has to do with the presence and salience of power relations. The trouble is that such power relations are often already established before the actual analysis of discourse can start, by means of – all in all often very 'uncritical' – contextual narratives. This then leads to a number of methodological claims guiding the work of interpretation. Let us once more take Wodak's (1997) article as an example. Her research team was called in to investigate and to

remedy certain institutional and organizational weaknesses in the out-patients' ward. Wodak's analysis shows that certain beliefs of hospital staff (what she calls the 'myth of efficiency', and ideas about an economy of time) are instances of false consciousness. In her view, the reasons for organizational failure lie elsewhere (in the 'opaque aspects' of reality). She concludes therefore:

Only an exact analysis of the context, an understanding of everyday life in the institution, and the sequential analysis of the discourse permit a full interpretation of events and the discovery of contradictions and of the ways in which power is exercised. (Wodak, 1997: 197)

Strictly speaking, the only analysis offered in her article is an analysis of the 'sequential analysis of discourse'; neither the 'context', nor 'everyday life in the institution' have been analyzed. Yet, *discourse analysis* is supposed to explain and clarify the 'hidden' power relations, the structure of which has already been given in the contextualizing accounts. So what does discourse analysis explain? Often (unsurprisingly), it confirms the forms of inequality and asymmetry already given in the description of the context of talk. In a lot of CDA work, context is often a mere background to rather orthodox (linguistic or interactional) discourse analysis, with some connections running between text and context, while both 'blocks' remain distinct units. 'Critique' thus becomes, too often and too much, a matter of the credibility of the researcher, whose account of power in contextual narratives is offered not for *inspection* but for *belief*.

Talk in-and-out-of interaction: conversation analysis

The overt bias contained in what is given as 'context', and the projection of 'relevant' context onto discourse has also been noted by scholars in Conversation Analysis (CA), notably by Emanuel Schegloff. When it comes to identifying text-context relations and locating critique in analysis, Schegloff advocates the primacy of 'internal analysis':

... one conclusion which I will want to draw from this exercise is that even where critical analysis is wanted, is justifiable, and can have its basic pre-conditions met, what it should properly be brought to bear on is an internally analyzed rendering of the event, the episode, the exchange, the 'text'. . . You need to have technical analysis *first*, in order to constitute the very object to which critical and sociopolitical analysis might sensibly and fruitfully be applied. And then you may find it no longer in point. (Schegloff, 1997: 174)

Schegloff offers a methodological argument for that claim: talk-in-interaction is an object 'with a defensible sense of its own reality' (Schegloff, 1997: 171), hence no analyst's imputations are required, as the socio-political dimension is provided by the speakers themselves and observable in the deployment of their interaction. Schegloff says: 'talk-in-interaction does provide . . . an Archimedean point . . . internal to the object of analysis itself' (Schegloff, 1997: 184).

CA shows an immense amount of respect for the density and complexity of human interaction; its accomplishments in bringing the richness of human talk to the fore are enormous. At the same time, due to a number of principles and self-imposed restrictions in its methodological program, there are limits to CA's relevance for the research agenda I wish to pursue here. I see two main problems: one that has to do with analysis as entextualization practice, and one that has to do with the location of the socio-political aspects in concrete stretches of talk (see also Duranti, 1997: 264–75).

To start with the first point, conversation-analytical interpretations of speakers' opinions, ideas, political positions, etc. are based on observations of interactional regularities. The argument appears to proceed along these lines: if participants make the expected moves, legitimate the things brought about by their interlocutors, establish validity for certain claims and respond to and co-construct identities, then we analysts are not 'mind reading' but 'we are virtually mandated to analyze it that way' (Schegloff, 1997: 175). Schegloffian CA thus becomes the analytical *replication* of what participants said and did. This core methodological argument is circular because the withdrawal of the analyst's voice depends on observations of speakers' regularities in behavior, and these regularities have been established by CA by means of analytically focused and empirically grounded claims, i.e. by using the analyst's voice. Note, for the sake of clarity, that observed regularities can of course be valid as claims about the object of investigation; my point is not to claim that they are false or that they are not vindicated, for instance, by speakers' own judgments of behavior. My problem is that this recognition of analytically established regularities in talk is lifted to the level of a replica of talk: what CA identifies in talk *is* talk. The mediating link between thing and description – analysis – is elided.

Analysis is entextualization – a term pointing towards processes of lifting text out of context, placing it in another context and adding metapragmatic qualifications to it, thus specifying the conditions for how texts should be understood, what they mean and stand for, and so on (see Silverstein and Urban, 1996). Despite the fact that conversation-analytical transcription procedures are a case in point, CA – or at least the brand of CA discussed here – fails to recognize even the existence of the entextualizing practices it applies to text, insisting instead on an isomorphy between 'original text-and-context' and 'analytic text-and-context'. The metapragmatic framing (and hence remodeling) involved in *all* analysis is denied, or, if it is acknowledged (as some CA practitioners readily do with, for example, transcription procedures), it is not applied in the work of interpretation; talk is defined and remodeled – 'textualized' – in the professional vision of CA (perhaps more so, and more radically so, than in most other branches of discourse analysis), and there is a belief that '[s]uch a maximally transparent strategic interactional text can be studied transcriptionally *in vitro* with confidence that the *in vivo* reality is close to hand' (Silverstein, 1992: 74).

This brings us to the second problem. In Schegloff's view, the social is defined as a matter of methodological principle to pertain only to the level of co-participants in specific stretches of talk: 'understanding . . . along gender lines, can also, in principle, be shown in any particular case to be "the understanding of the participants", but this needs to be *shown*' (Schegloff, 1997: 180). The methodological principle underlying this could be labeled the 'mundanization' of talk (cf. Briggs's, 1997b, comments earlier). Gendered, racialized talk needs to be treated in the first instance as orderly, 'normal' talk; 'special' contexts are in principle contexts like any other whose 'specialness' needs to be established by internal analysis of talk, which is in turn restricted to single, unique instances of talk. The latter is important: in contrast to, for example, linguistic-anthropological ethnography, CA tends to prefer single instances of talk, disregarding *post hoc* accounts of interaction or the way in which single instances can be embedded in larger patterns of interaction across events.

Yet, as Briggs argues (1997b), not all talk is the same, not all categories in social conduct are equivalent. It is one thing to characterize people as 'speakers' and 'hearers', another to characterize them, as in CA, as 'members' (of what?), and still another to categorize them in terms of institutionalized categories such as race, gender, ethnicity, sexual preference, age and so forth, the political and ideological importance of which has been established by other sorts of research. In Schegloff's and related work, a reduction of context is performed to a stereotypical, neutral and self-contained context, in which *everything* seems to happen. But talk (e.g. in institutional settings) can be understood along gender lines by *other* participants, later, and in consequential ways for the 'original' participants (Ochs, 1992). Anticipating the discussion in the next section, this is precisely one of the key critical issues: the fact that talk may *not* have certain implications to the ('direct') participants, that certain matters are not 'demonstrably relevant', but that they *are made* relevant by later re-entextualizations of that talk by others.

The option taken by Schegloff is clear: 'interaction' is equated with (single-instance) 'context'. Automatically, in terms of CA's research agenda, the relevant context for talking participants is idealized as being the unique interaction, and social roles and functions (including 'distal' elements such as institutional or political-ideological elements) are only 'relevant' in as far as they are 'procedurally consequential', i.e. in as far as they actually show up *demonstrably in the interactional practices*. Schegloff posits that 'social structure' (including power relations) is produced in (single instances of) interaction. In fact, the sociological ambition of CA is 'to show how the parties are embodying for one another the relevancies of the interaction and are thereby producing the social structure' (Schegloff, 1999: 113), and CA attempts to show how social structure appears 'in that actual conduct *to which it must finally be referred*' (1999: 114, emphasis added).

The problem lies in the association between 'talk-in-interaction' – the

object of CA – and the qualification of such instances of talk as ‘an activity in its own right’ (Schegloff, 1999: 109), an association that permits single cases of interaction to be taken as coterminus with relevant ‘context’. Talk is very often an activity that only *appears* to be ‘in its own right’, but which in fact is *at the same time* an activity that can be appropriated and made subject to interpretations and relevance assessments that are far beyond the (direct) participants’ concerns. ‘Talk-in-interaction’ is very often accompanied by ‘talk-out-of-interaction’.

Three forgotten contexts

The two approaches discussed above both offer views and accounts of contexts as a locus for deploying critical analysis, focusing strongly upon singular relationships between individual instances of text/discourse and context(s). The question is generally that of ‘[a] context for [a particular] text’. In both cases, I hope to have shown that the connection between discourse and social structure leaves much to be desired. In both cases, the relevance of contexts is generally based on judgments of demonstrability (involving connotations of explicitness, outspokenness, denotational aspects of language and so on): in so far as a text is believed to show *identifiable traces of social structure* (demonstrated or not, which is another matter), social structure serves as a critical context for a text.

So far, I can only state the problem. Rather than suggesting a direct way out, I want briefly to present some other contexts – or, better, present some phenomena of talk and language and suggest that they might be seen as ‘contexts’ to ‘texts’. In all three cases, the contexts I will offer will give us additional – cumulatively refining – inroads into social structure. In other words, their contextualizing function will consist in merging discourse and social structure, thus offering better prospects for critique. In all three cases, the contexts are not features of single texts but of larger economies of communication and textualization. They are not adequately dealt with in either CDA or CA – they are often ‘forgotten’ contexts.

I will illustrate my arguments by means of data from ongoing research on autobiographical narratives from African asylum seekers in Belgium (Blommaert, 1999a). These data, collected through long narrative interviews in 1998 at the height of a political crisis on asylum seekers in Belgium, are prime targets for ‘traditional’ critical analysis. The group that performs them is a very marginalized group in Belgian society whose rights and opportunities in life are few and who are the object of repression and administrative control. They are faced with huge institutional pressure to tell stories in specific ways – the outcome of the asylum procedure is almost completely based on (perceptions of) the cogency and coherence of the stories they tell. But the telling and interpretation of their stories involves complex contextualization work – more complex than can be captured by

the conceptions of context discussed in the previous section. To this I now turn.

Resources as contexts

The first forgotten context I wish to discuss is the complex of linguistic means and communicative skills usually identified as *resources*. Speakers can/cannot speak varieties of languages, they can/cannot write and read and they can/cannot mobilize specific resources for performing specific actions in society. And all these differences – different degrees of proficiency ranging from ‘not at all’ to ‘full mastery’ of codes, language varieties and styles – are socially consequential: resources are hierarchized in terms of functional adequacy, and those who have different resources often find that they have unequal resources, because access to some rights and benefits in society is constrained by access to specific communicative (e.g. narrative) resources (cf. Hymes, 1996).

Asylum seekers in Belgium are confronted with a complex set of administrative procedures, involving and presupposing access to various genres (e.g. legal texts, welfare regulations), various languages (Dutch, French, English) and codes (written, spoken). Apart from what they need in the context of the asylum procedure, they also need to be able to lead a life in a Belgian village or town. The approximately 50 asylum seekers we interviewed all used English, French or Dutch for conducting their daily business. Many of them did, however, display considerable difficulties in expressing themselves in these languages. Restricting ourselves to spoken discourse here, the degrees of proficiency ranged from very poor to sophisticated, and these differences obviously affect the structure and content of narratives. Shifting and mixing of codes, varieties and styles was a crucial ingredient of the stories as well (see Maryns and Blommaert, 2000). Let us take a look at example 1, a brief fragment from a narrative by an Angolese man told in French.⁴

Fragment 1

oui/l'autre président . . . (xxxxxx)/ on l'a empoisonné/ c'est le président Mobutu/ qui a mis le poison retardé/ il est parti au russe/ l'URSS/ pour traiter/ il a retourné/ il est mort/ mais on a abandonné son corps hein/ oui/ *{Question: C'était un président de MPLA?}* C'était le même mouvement MPLA/ dans le temps/ année septante-cinq/ quand il est mort on dit/ comme on = il est marxisme/ on a pris on a choisi =on= on a fait faux testament/ cette testament c'était au temps du russe qui a fait ça/ comme toi tu =le= le président il est mort/ il a décidé Eduardo qui va me remplacer/ sans vote/ parce que il est toujours du même parti/ Eduardo il est d'origine angolais/ mais il est des Cap Verdiens/ parce que ce sont des anciens prisonniers/ et Portugais il a mis à l'île hein/ nous sommes à l'océan/ et on a mis une prison là-bas/ parce qu'il est venu pour commander l'indépendance/ c'était une petite ville =une petite= une petite village/ on a mis au pouvoir/ maintenant le président/ c'est on dit/ il dit que non/ tous les gens/ qui parlent Lingala/ les gens du Nord/ ce sont

des gens plus malins/ plus intelligents/ par rapport au gens du Sud/ en Angola nous sommes quatre couleurs/ comme le Bré= le Brésil.

Translation

yes/the other president . . . (xxxxxx)/they have poisoned him/ it's president Mobutu/ who put the delayed poison/ he has left to Russia/ the USSR/ to treat/ he gave back/ he died/ but they have left his corpse, right/ yes/ *{{Question: It was a president of the MPLA?}}*/ It was the same movement MPLA/ in those days/ year seventy-five/ when he died they say/ like they =he is Marxism/ they took they chose =they =they have made false testament/ those testament it was in the time of Russian that has made it/ since you you =the =the president is dead/ he decided Eduardo who is going to replace me/ without vote/ because he is always of the same party/ Eduardo he is of Angolan origin/ but he is of the Cape Verdians/ because they are former prisoners/ and Portuguese has put on the island, right/ we are at the ocean/ and they have put a prison over there/ because he had come to command the independence/ it was a small town =a small =a small village/ they have put to power/ now the president/ that is what they say/ he said that no/ all the people/ who speak Lingala/ the people from the north/ they are more clever people/ more intelligent/ in relation to the people from the south/ in Angola we are four colors/ like Bra= Brazil

The Angolese man is at pains to explain the wider political context in which his escape from Angola should be set. In doing so, he is forced to provide detailed information about the political régime in Angola, including digressions into the Portuguese colonial practices (sending MPLA fighters into exile on the Cabo Verde islands), and into linguistic and ethnic divisions in the country. The story is highly complex, and apparently all these details count for the narrator. Such detailed and complex digressions on the home country feature in almost all the narratives we recorded, to the extent that they can generically be identified as 'home narratives' (Blommaert, 1999a). Home narratives fulfill often crucial contextualizing functions in the stories: without them, a precise understanding of the causes and motives for the escape cannot be reached. Narrators often explicitly flagged the importance of these dense contextual accounts for an understanding of who they were and why they came to Belgium. The point is that this complex and important package of information has to be transmitted by means of a very 'broken' variety of French, informally acquired during the period spent travelling through the Congo and during his stay in Belgium (and carrying traces of this migration itinerary). The French used by the Angolese man is, like the English and Dutch of many others, a product of refugee life, and it mirrors the marginality in which they find themselves wherever they go.

The shape of narratives cannot be separated from their content: stories such as this one are shaped to a large extent by the resources people have for telling them, *what* can be told depends on *how* one can tell it. Complex

stories become even more complex when they are told in uncomfortable varieties of languages. The way in which the temporal sequentiality of events is organized in fragment 1, for instance, is highly problematic (e.g. where do we have to situate the 'parce qu'il est venu pour commander l'indépendance' in the passage on Cabo Verde?); the same goes for crucial qualifications given by means of less than adequate lexical choices (e.g. 'il est *marxisme*' instead of 'il est *marxiste*'); deixis and reference are another domain of problems (see the 'il' in 'parce qu'il est venu pour commander l'indépendance'). The struggle with the medium of narration also has an effect on the rhythm and the prosody, causing disruptions in the flow of narration and the loss of an important range of contextualization clues. Told to Belgian interlocutors who are either native speakers (in the case of Dutch and French) or non-native speakers commanding a sometimes equally problematic variety of English, the potential to be misunderstood is understandably very high. 'Rambling' stories are quickly turned into 'bad' stories, qualified as 'unreliable' or full of 'unclear elements' and 'contradictions'. Parts of the stories that are difficult to understand during the interaction are often *not* understood at all. The resources controlled by the narrators and their interlocutors are part and parcel of the interpretations given to their stories, and given the central role of the stories in the asylum procedure, matters of resources may influence the outcome of their asylum application.

Resources and the way in which they feature as elements of social structure are often 'invisible' contexts in discourse analysis. Illiterates will not show up in analyses of written discourse; their perceptions of 'news' and 'politics' do not feature in analyses of newspaper reporting. Such analyses are not about, nor *for* them. The errors in discourse of people who lack access to highly standardized varieties of a language are often edited and corrected, and thus disappear as indexes of social structure and inequality-as-identity for those people. Their utterances are usually transcribed into standard orthographies of languages, so that social stigmata in accents and 'small' discourse features are effaced and a homogenization of such language users with 'average' features of the speech community is accomplished (Ochs, 1999).⁵ However, the importance of resources lies in the deep relation between language and a general economy of symbols and status in societies. One does not just 'have' or 'know' a language; there is a complex and highly sensitive political-economic dynamics of acquisition and differential distribution behind such seemingly innocuous phrases. Words, accents, intonation contours, styles all come with a history of use and abuse; they also come with a history of assessment and evaluation. This is where language leads us directly to the heart of social structure: an investigation into language becomes an investigation into the systems and patterns of allocation of power symbols and instruments, and thus an investigation into basic patterns of privilege and disenfranchisement in societies (see Gumperz, 1982; Bourdieu, 1991; Heller, this volume).

Looking at issues of resources ensures that any instance of language use would be deeply and fundamentally socially contextualized; connections between talk and social structure would be *intrinsic*.

At the same time, the context-shaping role of resources extends beyond the occurrence of single texts or instances of discourse. They are not strictly features of texts, but of societies and social structures; hence, the chance that they would emerge from doctrinaire (linguistic) discourse analysis are very slim – often, they belong to the realm of the ‘normal’ and of the ‘usual’, they *condition* interactions in society, and some interactions will simply never occur. In a critical study of language, however, the absence of certain discourse events and the particular shape of others *because of matters of resource allocation* should be a major preoccupation: why cannot everyone speak or write in certain ways? Why is some discourse the privilege of some people because it is based on exclusive usages of rare resources? For an understanding of what language does in society, I believe these are fundamental questions.

Text trajectories

A second ‘forgotten’ context has already been briefly mentioned above. One of the features of, for instance, institutional communication processes, is the shifting of discourse across contexts: talk finds its way into notes, summaries, case reports, citations, discussions of others. Briggs (1997a) has argued that precisely this shifting of texts between contexts – re-contextualization practices – involves crucial questions of power. Not every context is accessible to everyone, and re-contextualization practices depend on who has access to which contextual space (a point already elegantly raised by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, 1957). Access here also depends on resources: re-contextualization often involves a technology of contextualization, a degree of expertise that is very exclusive and the object of tremendous inequality in any society (e.g. legal re-contextualizations require access to legal expertise, see Philips, 1998). The dynamics of re-contextualization clearly lead us back into issues of differential access to power resources, and thus again lead us directly to social structure (Bauman and Briggs, 1990).

In the Belgian asylum procedure, the story of the applicant is the central ingredient, and obviously a number of things happen to the stories of applicants. The long interview on their motives for seeking asylum in Belgium is followed by a number of administrative text-making procedures: a case report, quotation of fragments in notes and letters exchanged between the administration, lawyers or welfare workers, official interpretations and summaries in verdicts from the asylum authorities, and so forth. Consider the following fragment from an official letter to the Angolese man, in which he is notified of the rejection of his asylum application. The rejection is motivated by means of interpretative summaries of parts of the story of the man (Dutch original, my translation).

Fragment 2

The concerned was interrogated on 23 November 1993 at the Commissariat-General [for Refugees and Stateless Persons], in the presence of [name], his attorney.

He claimed to be a 'political informant' of the MPLA. On 18 October 1992, however, he passed on information to UNITA. At the UNITA office, however, he met with Major [name], who works for the MPLA. Two days later, Major [name] had the concerned arrested. Fearing that the concerned would give the Major away at the trial, [name of the Major] helped the concerned to escape. The concerned fled to [locality] where a priest arranged for his departure from Angola. The concerned came, together with his wife [name and register number] and three children, through Zaïre and by plane, to Belgium. They arrived on 19 May 1993.

It has to be noted that the concerned remains very vague at certain points. Thus he is unable to provide details about the precise content of his job as 'political informant'. Furthermore the account of his escape lacks credibility. Thus it is unlikely that the concerned could steal military clothes and weapons without being noticed and that he could consequently climb over the prison wall.

It is also unlikely that the concerned and his wife could pass the passport control at Zaventem [Brussels Airport] bearing a passport lacking their names and their pictures.

Furthermore, the itinerary of the concerned is impossible to verify due to a lack of travel documents (the concerned sent back the passports).

The statements of the concerned contain contradictions when compared to his wife's account. Thus he declares that the passports which they received from the priest [name] were already completely in order at the time they left Angola. His wife claims that they still had to apply for visas in Zaïre.

Two comments are in order. First, the asylum application is not constructed in one act of communication; it is constructed through a sequence of re-textualizations, involving far-reaching recontextualizations of the story, summarizing and rewording practices, and the reframing of a story in a legal and procedural framework containing criteria for 'truth' and 'plausibility' (Blommaert, 1999a). This sequence is fixed: the text trajectory is a uniform administrative procedure. The 'procedurally consequent' context, so to speak, involves a series of individual events as well as the relations between these events: the fact that talk is translated, written, summarized and put into a legal/procedural framework, in sum, that every step in the systematically and uniformly performed process involves not replication but far-reaching transformations of the 'original' story. Yet, throughout this series of transformations, the story is still said to be that of the asylum applicant (cf. phrases such as 'the statements of the concerned'). So, what is 'the story of the applicant'? The story is the whole text trajectory.

Second, in light of the remarks on resources made above, the salience

of text trajectories becomes even greater. Every step in the trajectory involves inequalities in resources. The story told in either a native language and translated (usually into French or English) by an interpreter, or in the sort of varieties of French, English or Dutch illustrated in fragment 1, is put into a standard, written variety of Dutch or French. It is filtered in the way discussed above: parts that were hard to understand originally are either deleted from the story, or misinterpreted. The administrator has selected those parts of the story that appear to be of consequence for the outcome of the asylum application, using criteria of coherence and consistency that are directly fed into assessments of truth and reliability. Then this is measured against legal criteria, and the whole story is evaluated as either 'truthful' or 'unreliable'. Inequalities in linguistic-communicative resources in the asylum procedure accumulate as the story is processed along the text trajectory.

Attention to this type of shifting of discourse across context involving issues of control and power in each of the phases of recontextualization is a feature of analysis that can obviously not be accommodated by CA. In CDA, Fairclough (1992) gives some attention to such phenomena, though the focus is on textual flows rather than on the shifting in contexts and resources that determines recontextualization work. My approach is derived from ethnography – an awareness that discourse is contextualized in each phase of its existence, and that every act of discourse production, reproduction and consumption involves shifts in contexts (Silverstein and Urban, 1996; Philips, 1998). In studying discourse and social structure, such shifting of discourse across contexts containing important power features appears to be a crucial critical enterprise.

Data histories

A third 'forgotten context' is directly related to the foregoing: the history of discourse data. As said above, analysis is entextualization – it is, in other words, also a text trajectory. Hence some sensitivity to what professionals do with discourse samples as soon as they call them data can be useful. I have noted above that, especially in CDA, the ethnographic origin and situatedness of data is hardly treated; similar remarks can be made with regard to CA (Duranti, 1997: 267–70). In ethnography, however, the history of data is acknowledged as an important element in their interpretation. It is recognized that the way in which data have been gathered, recorded and treated by the analyst has an influence on what these data tell us (e.g. Bauman, 1995; Haviland, 1996; Silverstein, 1996; Urban, 1996). The time, place and occasion at which data are being gathered have an effect on the data: they are what they are because they occurred in that shape in that context.⁶ The question 'Why do we investigate *this now?*' is an important question, for it points towards the social situatedness of our own research.

This is important for it is often either overlooked as a factor in research

and interpretation, or treated as a self-evident matter and given little prominence. I intend to foreground it, for it is again a case of often 'invisible' context, determining what can happen how and at what time. One is reminded here of Foucault's (1970) 'archive': utterances that are intrinsically linked to conditions of sayability. Some things can only be said at certain moments, under certain conditions; likewise, some things can only be researched at certain moments and in certain conditions. I mentioned at the beginning of this section that our data were collected in 1998. A few weeks prior to the start of our fieldwork, an important political crisis erupted over asylum matters in Belgium. The origin of the crisis was the violent death of a Nigerian female asylum seeker at the hands of police officers. As a reaction to this incident, there was a spontaneous outburst of sympathy for the predicament of asylum seekers among large sections of the Belgian population; asylum seekers also organized themselves and demonstrated in great numbers for the first time in history. They occupied churches and schools and were eager to tell their stories. Suddenly, and for a brief period of just a couple of months, we found ourselves in unique, unprecedented research conditions. Prior to this incident it was very difficult actually to find asylum seekers, most of them being illegal aliens and living underground. And after a few months, the protest movement lost momentum and the asylum seekers went underground again. During this brief period, we recorded the stories of people who wanted to tell the stories of their miserable lives back home, on the road and in Belgium. People told their stories eagerly and repeatedly to anyone who cared to listen. One important feature of this period was *contact*: the public outcry after the death of the young Nigerian woman created a forum for debate between Belgians and asylum seekers – a forum in which stories about asylum and asylum seekers' lives could be circulated. Consequently, the stories changed and many of the stories in our corpus display features of what Hymes (1998) calls 'fully-formed narratives': narratives that display growing tightness and narrative structure due to repeated instances of narrating, 'rehearsals' so to speak. Thus, the concrete context of the fieldwork had an impact on our data on at least two levels: (1) the fact that people could be interviewed at all and were willing to disclose their identities and 'cases' to us; (2) the particular structural characteristics of some of the stories, bearing traces of repeated narrating.

The narratives only exist as research objects because of a particular context: the stories were only available during that period and because of the political upheaval which foregrounded the issue of asylum seekers in public debate. It was a crisis phenomenon, an effect of one of these moments when chaos and acceleration seem to take over and force all kinds of 'hidden transcripts' to the surface (Scott, 1992). After this brief period, the stories disappeared together with the people who told them. So they can only be researched as instances of inequality because they were recorded at a moment in which such inequality had become visible and

salient and had become accessible for research. The fact that certain discourse forms only become visible and accessible at particular times and under particular conditions is in itself an important phenomenon, which tells us a lot about our societies and ourselves, and which necessarily situates particular discourses in the wider sociopolitical environment in which they occur. The stories have a particular 'load' which relates to (and indexes) their place in a particular social, political and historical moment. Removing this load from the narratives could involve the risk of obscuring the reasons for their production as well as the fact that they are tied to identifiable people and to particular circumstances that occasioned them.

Conclusions

Conceptions of context can be critical to the extent that, rather than as direct referential contributions to text-meaning, they are seen as conditions for discourse production and for looking at discourse, both from lay and professional perspectives. We should be looking at how the linguistic generates the economic, social, political, as well as how the economic, social and political generate the linguistic. The problems I have identified with treatments of context in CDA and CA all revolved around the centrality of text in both traditions: the ultimate ambition still remains explaining text, not explaining society through the privileged window of discourse. My own suggestions were informed by the opposite strategy: using discourse as a social object, the linguistic characteristics of which are conditioned and determined by circumstances that are far beyond the grasp of the speaker or user, but are social, political, cultural and historical. It is remarkable that whenever we say that text is 'situated' in discourse-analytical terms, we seem to refer to forms of locality: the unique, one-time and micro-situatedness of text. From this individual situatedness, larger structures, patterns or 'rules' can then be deduced, but these generalizations do not involve higher-level situatedness: discourse seems to lose context as soon as it is raised above the single-text level. This different degree of situatedness – large, general, supra-individual, typical, structural – should have a place in any form of critical study of discourse. Concretely: discourse analysis could benefit enormously from elementary insights from sociolinguistics – the social differentiation and unequal distribution of linguistic-communicative resources, for instance. It could also benefit enormously from the insights of ethnography, in understanding the importance of histories of text and data, for instance. Both sources of insight would contribute new contexts to discourse, contexts that cannot be separated from social structure. The emphasis on interactional and discursive detail could complement existing social-theoretical efforts at combining the interactional and the structural, such as that of Bourdieu (1991).

To the extent that critical approaches to discourse should be

concerned with power, they cannot be concerned exclusively with either predefined power – power of which text is only illustrative or symptomatic, as in CDA – nor with explicitized power within the grasp of individual practices, as in CA. It must also be concerned with invisible, hegemonic, normalized power – Foucaultian ‘capillary’ power as well as Barthes’s invisible capitalist bourgeoisie – *in* language and not only *through* language. As we all know, language itself is an *object* of inequality and hegemony; revealing the power effects of language cannot overlook this dimension of how language and speech themselves have been ‘molested’, to use Hymes’s (1996) term. That simple phenomenon in itself – people talking and writing, using language for specific functions – is not an unquestionable given, and analysis should not start, so to speak, as soon as people open their mouths. Looking into these larger phenomena of language is a crucial target for critical language studies, for it is certainly a rich and important source for finding ‘contexts’.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to my companions in the FWO working group on ‘Language, Power and Identity’ – Monica Heller, Jim Collins, Ben Rampton, Jef Verschueren and Stef Slembrouck – for generous comments, criticism and feedback on the numerous versions of this article. Mary Bucholtz provided perceptive and constructive criticism on the version presented at the AAA session. Jan-Ola Östman, Dell Hymes, Karen Sykes and Johannes Wagner all commented on various occasions on the asylum seekers’ stories. Katrijn Maryns, with whom I worked on these data, has been an excellent and highly critical home audience. Thanks, with all the usual disclaimers, are due to all these people.
- 2 In my discussion, I will not do justice to the variety of approaches as well as the immense differences of nuance and analytical sophistication within both schools. I will have to generalize and focus on stereotypical work in that domain in an attempt to raise general issues of which, no doubt, many practitioners of discourse analysis are acutely aware. Suffice it to say here that I am familiar with good work in both schools and that my comments will be applicable to various degrees to work done in those schools. Blommaert (1997a) provides lengthy and more detailed discussions of ‘context’ in CDA as well as in CA.
- 3 In the field of analysis of political discourse (one of CDA’s main preoccupations), often also highly simplistic and strongly biased *historical* narratives are given as ‘background against which discourse needs to be understood’. In such historical accounts, historical roles (aggressor, victim, winner, loser) can be pre-inscribed in ways that are hardly ‘neutral’. See the discussion between Galasinski (1997a, 1997b) and Blommaert (1997b) on the ‘postcommunist’ framing of an analysis of political discourse.
- 4 I provide English translations, though not without the warning that these translations obviously cannot do justice to the ‘broken’ and hence very complicated ways of speaking. I will use a highly simplified format of transcription here. Symbols used are: = for rapid successions of turns or syllables in self-corrections; / for intonationally marked phrase or sentence ends; dots indicate pauses.

- There has so far not been any systematic research on literacy and written discourse among this group; a small sample of bureaucratic writing was presented in Blommaert (1999b). Illiteracy and semi-literacy are clearly widespread among the group of African asylum seekers, and many of them need to seek assistance from lawyers or welfare workers for their paperwork. The data were collected in late 1998 by students of the African studies program, Ghent University, in the context of a fieldwork project supervised by me.
- 5 Rampton (1995 and this volume) has shown the relevance of small phonetic details, usually overlooked, for an understanding of identity processes among ethnic youth in Britain. The adoption of a 'creole' vowel instead of an 'Anglo' equivalent proved to be a sensitive index of identity alignments and styling. Rampton – significantly – had to use phonetic transcription symbols to draw attention to such features; standard transcription based on standard English orthography would not allow for the identification of such fine-grained differences, nor, of course, of their social and cultural implications.
 - 6 Blommaert (1997a: 49–61) illustrates the importance of data histories by means of Dell Hymes's classic paper 'Breakthrough into Performance' (Hymes, 1975).

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